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ABSTRACT

Research on environmental strategies to increase positive peer interactions has been conducted on a wide range of children, including 2- to 5-year-old typically developing children and children with a variety of developmental and social disabilities. Intervention efforts have been successful with both typically developing children and children with mild to moderate disabilities, although research has indicated that for children with more severe social needs, intervention effects may take longer. This "What Works Brief" discusses a number of environmental strategies that teachers and other caregivers can make to promote positive social interactions among children in the classroom. Because the strategies are primarily based on teacher planning and organization, they can be easily adapted to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse children. The brief is arranged in an easy-to-read format that answers the following five questions: (1) What are the environmental strategies to increase positive social interactions?; (2) Why are environmental strategies important for increasing positive social interactions?; (3) Who are the children who have participated in research on using environmental strategies to increase positive social interactions?; (4) Where do I find more information on implementing this practice?; and (5) What is the scientific basis for this practice? The brief contains vignettes that illustrate how specific strategies might be used and includes a one page summary handout for practitioners and families. (SG)

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SERIES

WHAT WORKS BRIEFS

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Using Environmental Strategies to Promote Positive Social Interactions

This *What Works Brief* is part of a continuing series of short, easy-to-read, "how to" information packets on a variety of evidence-based practices, strategies, and intervention procedures. The Briefs are designed to help teachers and other caregivers support young children's social and emotional development. They include examples and vignettes that illustrate how practical strategies might be used in a variety of early childhood settings and home environments.

Painting at an easel, playing a game on a classroom computer, doing a puzzle, and playing on a swing are all examples of preschool activities that young children enjoy. But these activities have something else in common. They are all primarily done individually, limiting the child's opportunities for positive peer social interactions. However, teachers and other caregivers can make many adaptations to the environment to encourage positive social interactions between children in the classroom.

One advantage of environmental strategies is that they require little adult intervention once the planning and organization are complete.

It's 15 minutes before the children arrive at the Douglas County Early Childhood Center, and Mr. Ron and the other caregivers are busy preparing the room for the day. Because it's Monday and the start of a new storybook and theme, the teachers are busy putting away materials from the past two weeks and getting out new materials. They have planned ahead and know that during center time the block and art centers are going to be open. Because the art center has been closed for the past two weeks, they are expecting it to be very popular. The block center, however, was open last week, so to try and maintain the children's interest in playing there, the teachers have replaced the cars and the garage that the children were using with the blocks with all kinds of animals, another favorite accessory in the block center. In addition, for the next two weeks, the caregivers are going to exchange the bikes and tricycles they've been using outside for two wagons that parents have donated.

The caregivers' last task before the children arrive is to plan where the children are going to sit at circle time and at snack time. They talk about seating Angel, a child with poor social skills, next to Leah, a very social peer. The caregivers plan to have Leah help pass out the snack, and knowing that Angel likes snack, they count on at least a few good social interactions between the two children. They also know that Leah will be a good model for motor actions and fingerplays for Angel during circle time, and they know that she can help pass out and collect props that they plan to use.

What Are Environmental Strategies to Increase Positive Social Interactions?

Environmental strategies are changes and adaptations that can be made to a classroom's physical environment, schedule, activities, and materials to encourage positive social interactions between children in the classroom. One advantage of environmental strategies is that they require little adult intervention once the planning and organization are complete.

Some of the changes and adaptations that teachers and other caregivers can make to maximize and promote positive social interactions include examining:

- Group Composition,
- Classroom Activities, and
- Classroom Materials.

The most important way that caregivers can influence group composition is to make certain that children with good social skills are always "grouped" or encouraged to be involved in activities with peers who are less skilled socially. Providing access to socially competent peers, while a necessity, is not enough to promote positive social behaviors.

Arranging the physical environment and selecting activities and materials can also encourage peer interactions. For example, caregivers can:

- **Limit the number of "centers" available in the classroom.** By limiting the number of centers open and rotating or changing them periodically (e.g., weekly or every other week), caregivers can increase the chances that peer interactions will take place. For example, if a classroom has 10 open centers and 14 children, on average only 1 or 2 children will be in a center at a time. By closing 2 or 3 of those centers, caregivers can increase the number of children per center, and they can then rotate the centers that are open, keeping them novel and interesting.
- **Use interesting and novel toys and materials.** Although children enjoy their familiar toys and materials, new or novel items in the environment can increase social interactions. An excellent cost-efficient way to maintain "newness" of materials is to use a toy rotation system. A toy rotation system simply involves changing and rotating the materials available to the children. Caregivers can rotate whole centers as described above or simply change the materials available

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in a center, as Mr. Ron and the other caregivers did at the block center in the example above.

- **Use toys and materials that will promote cooperation and sharing.** A number of commonly available toys and materials work best and tend to be more fun when two or more children use them together. Materials such as teeter-totters, rocking boats, wagons, and other large play items require that children coordinate their actions. By replacing the bikes and tricycles with wagons that one child can pull another child (or two children) in, Mr. Ron has improved the chances of getting positive social interactions while the children are outside. Another example might be replacing the easels that are used in the art center for painting with large pieces of paper taped on the classroom wall so that children can paint together.

- **Keep children near socially competent peers.** Being near more socially competent children can both increase positive interaction and reduce problem behaviors. Adults can encourage this close contact by making sure that planned activities are meaningful and fun for all children and by giving children time and attention when they are playing together. For example, a caregiver might say, "Wow, this is so great that all of you are playing together in housekeeping." Positioning children can also help encourage interaction. Instead of having two children stand next to each other on one side of the water table, caregivers can place one child on the end or have a child on each side of the table so they can face each other and see what the other child is doing.

For environmental strategies such as those outlined above to be used effectively, caregivers need planning time to examine the daily schedule, physical environment, and classroom activities. Additionally, caregivers must commit to *daily* implementation of these strategies around routine activities in the classroom to achieve maximum benefits. For example, if at circle time, a caregiver positions Matt (a social peer) next to Bryan (a child with social deficits) but doesn't provide appropriate activities or materials, Bryan may not talk to or interact with Matt. Thus, the caregiver has missed opportunities to encourage peer interactions. Likewise, if caregivers provide toys that are intended for one child to use at a time, or if caregivers don't rotate toys and materials regularly, they lose valuable opportunities for social interaction that would have been created by making these relatively simple adaptations to the environment.

Why Are Environmental Strategies Important for Increasing Positive Social Interactions?

Research has shown that environments that have been carefully and effectively arranged and maintained can significantly increase positive peer-to-peer interactions. Using toys that support social interaction (e.g., wagons, painting a mural) and grouping children with social deficits with more social peers can dramatically affect the frequency and duration of positive peer interactions. As children become more engaged, inappropriate behavior is likely to decrease. Although environmental strategies require time and planning outside of the classroom day, results are often seen with little direct teacher involvement with the children. Results are truly a result of the environment. For example, replacing the tricycles with the wagons requires time before the children arrive, but once the materials are out, children tend to give each other rides and play together spontaneously, without additional teacher direction or support.

Environmental changes can be further enhanced by combining these strategies with specific social skills instruction such as the Peer-Mediated Strategies outlined in *What Works Brief #8*, titled *Promoting Positive Peer Social Interactions*.

Who Are the Children Who Have Participated in Research on Using Environmental Strategies to Increase Positive Social Interactions?

Research on environmental strategies to increase positive peer interactions has been conducted on a wide range of children, including 2- to 5-year-old typically developing children and children with a variety of developmental and social disabilities. Intervention efforts have been successful with both typically developing children and children with mild to moderate disabilities, although research has indicated that for children with more severe social needs, intervention effects may take longer. Boys and girls benefit equally from these interventions. Because these strategies are primarily based on teacher planning and organization, they can be easily adapted to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse children.

Being near more socially competent children can both increase positive interaction and reduce problem behaviors.

As we look back at Mr. Ron's classroom, we find that the environmental strategies that the caregivers put in place that morning are working well. During circle time, Leah helped Angel by modeling the motor actions to "Five Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed," and she passed Angel a monkey used as a prop for the song. Similarly, at snack, Leah gave snacks to all the children at her table, including Angel, creating several opportunities for positive peer interactions. During center time, the newly opened art center was popular as expected, and by limiting the number of paint cups available, the caregivers created additional opportunities for peer interactions. In the block center, several children worked together to make a zoo with the blocks and animals. Providing these materials created ample opportunities for children to make play suggestions, share materials, and compliment each other. Outside, the wagons were a huge hit as children gave each other rides, pulling one another around and reenacting "The Little Engine that Could"—this week's storybook.

We welcome your feedback on this What Works Brief. Please go to the CSEFEL Web site (http://csefel.uiuc.edu) or call us at (217) 333-4123 to offer suggestions.

Where do I Find Information on Implementing This Practice?

(See CSEFEL's Web site at http://csefel.uiuc.edu) for additional resources.)

Many articles, books, and curricula provide information on setting up classroom environments and using environmental strategies to increase peer interactions. For further information, see the following:

Odom, S. L., McConnell, S. R., Ostrosky, M., Peterson, C., Skellenger, A., Spicuzza, R., Chandler, L. K., & McEvoy, M. A. (1997). *Play time, social time: Organizing your classroom to build interaction skills*. Minneapolis: Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota. [The curriculum can be ordered at: http://ici.umn.edu/products/curricula.html.]

Sandall, S., McLean, M. E., & Smith, B. J. (2000). *DEC recommended practices in early intervention/early childhood special education*. Longmont, CO: Sopris West.

What is the Scientific Basis for This Practice?

For those wishing to explore this topic further, the following researchers have documented the effects of using environmental strategies to promote positive peer interactions in early childhood settings:

Chandler, L. K., Fowler, S. A., & Lubeck, R. C. (1992). An analysis of the effects of multiple setting events on the social behavior of preschool children with special needs. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 25*(2), 249-263.

De Klyen, M., & Odom, S. L. (1989). Activity structure and social interactions with peers in developmentally integrated play groups. *Journal of Early Intervention, 13*(4), 342-352.

Hendrickson, J. M., Strain, P. P., Trembley, A., & Shores, R. E. (1981). Relationship between toy and material use and the occurrence of social interaction behaviors by normally developing preschool children. *Psychology in the Schools, 18*(4), 500-504.

Ivory, J. J., & McCollum, J. A. (1999). Effects of social and isolate toys on social play in an inclusive setting. *Journal of Special Education, 32*(4), 238-243.

Martin, S. S., Brady, M. P., & Williams, R. E. (1991). Effects of toys on the social behavior of preschool children in integrated and nonintegrated groups: Investigation of a setting event. *Journal of Early Intervention, 15*(2), 153-161.

McEvoy, M. A., Fox, J. J., & Rosenberg, M. S. (1991). Organizing preschool environments: Suggestions for enhancing the development/learning of preschool children with handicaps. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 11*(2), 18-28.

This *What Works Brief* was developed by the Center for the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning.
Contributors to this *Brief* were T. Bovey and P. Strain.

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Handout #6

Preplan for environmental changes and adaptations that can be made.
Planning can involve looking at several aspects of the classroom including

- Activities that are open and available for children
- Classroom materials that are available
- Composition of small groups at centers and other activities in the classroom

Examine your group composition.
Make sure children with good social skills are grouped with children with poor social skills.

Keep children with low social skills from isolating themselves by using novel and interesting materials and encouraging children with good social skills to interact with them.

Limit the number of centers available.
If you have 10 centers available during center time and 14 children in your class, there is a good chance that only 1 or 2 children will be in a center at a time, reducing the opportunities for social interactions. Increase the likelihood of positive social interactions by limiting the number of open centers to increase the number of children at each center.

Make sure there are enough choices for children during play time. If children are bored and not engaged, they are more likely to exhibit problem behaviors.

Keep toys and materials novel and interesting.
Rotating toys is an excellent and cost-effective means of maintaining the "newness" and novelty of materials. Simply shelving materials so they are not available for a few weeks and reintroducing them to the classroom can make them appear brand new and greatly increase the children's interest in them.

Use toys and materials with high social value.
Replace toys and materials made for individual use (e.g., Sit and Spin, small puzzles, painting easels) with toys and materials made for cooperative use (e.g., rocking boat, giant floor puzzles, mural painting) to help increase the opportunities for positive social interactions.

Give positive attention and reinforcement to children who are playing together.
Give specific positive feedback to children who are playing nicely together and engaging in positive social interactions (e.g., "You two are doing a great job building that zoo together!").

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